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ABSTRACT

While prospective investigations of social support, coping, and stress are accumulating, there is relatively little empirical knowledge regarding how these variables are related to each other among adolescents, and virtually no empirical knowledge regarding their relationship to subjective states in that population. This study examined the relationships of perceived social support from friends and from family, coping, and life events to concomitant and subsequent states of anxiety, anger, and curiosity. Subjects were 90 predominantly lower middle-class, minority girls attending an all-girls high school in an urban area. Subjects completed a demographic cover sheet, the Perceived Social Support from Family and from Friends scales, Problem-focused Coping Scale, Adolescent Life Events Checklist, and the State-Trait Personality Inventory on two occasions one month apart. The results indicated that perceived social support was related to state anxiety and anger, as well as to coping; life events were related to anxiety. Partial correlations suggest that perceived family support may contribute to subsequent state anxiety and anger, and anxiety may contribute to subsequent life events. These findings have implications for prevention, and suggest a need for future research into the relationship between subjective states and maladaptive behavior. (Author/NB)

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Perceived Social Support and Subjective States in Urban Adolescent Girls

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Running head: Social support and subjective states

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Abstract

The relationships of perceived social support from friends and from family, coping, and life events to concomitant and subsequent subjective states of anxiety, anger, and curiosity were investigated. Subjects were 90 predominantly lower middle-class, minority girls attending high school in an urban area (Bronx, NY). Group administrations were conducted on two occasions separated by one month. Results indicated that perceived social support was related to state anxiety and anger, as well as to coping, and life events to anxiety. Partial correlations suggested that perceived family support may contribute to subsequent state anxiety and anger, and anxiety to subsequent life events. Results are discussed in terms of implications for prevention, and a need for future research into the relationship between subjective states and maladaptive behavior.

While the study of personality traditionally has emphasized the examination of intrapersonal traits, a more recent approach has been to incorporate the study of less "intransigent" subjective states (e.g., Mayer & Gaschke, 1988), such as state anxiety and anger. Such an approach is compatible with an orientation of prevention of maladaptive behavior. Subjective states may be important in predicting performance on a variety of tasks, or, stated more generally, may contribute to more or less adaptive attitudes and behavior in a variety of situations (e.g., Miranda,& Persons, 1988). Little is known, unfortunately, regarding the naturally occurring (as opposed to experimentally induced) determinants of such states.

One group to which questions regarding the nature and determinants of subjective states are particularly relevent, from several perspectives, is adolescents. Adolescence is described as a developmental period of relatively high normative and nonnormative life stress, prompting many investigators to underscore the importance of adolescence as a focus for preventive interventions, particularly for minority and/or inner-city youth (e.g., Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981). Adolescents are frequently described as being emotionally labile, with poor coping efforts often anecdotally attributed to such lability. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationships among perceived social support, coping, and life events, and

three subjective states: anxiety, anger, and curiosity, in a group of urban, adolescent girls. While prospective investigations of social support, coping, and stress are accumulating, (e.g., Fondacaro & Moos, 1987; Holohan & Moos, 1981), there still relatively little empirical knowledge regarding how these variables are related to each other among adolescents (Burt, Cohen, & Bjorck, 1988); and virtually none regarding their relationship to subjective states in that population.

Method

Subjects

Subjects included 90 students (55 freshmen, 35 juniors) of an all-female high school in the Bronx, NY, that is attended primarily by children of lower middle-class, ethnic minority families. Approximately half (48.9%) reported eligibility for a free lunch program that is subsidized by New York City. The ethnic composition of the subjects was as follows: 31 (34.4%) white, 20 (22.2%) black, 35 (38.9%) Hispanic, three (3.3%) Asian, and one "other."

Measures

Demographic cover sheet.

Perceived Social Support from Family (PSS-Fa) and from Friends (PSS-Fr) (Procidano & Heller, 1983). These are 20-item measures, to which subjects respond "yes," "no," or "don't know" to declarative statements regarding their perceptions of support, information, and feedback provided by

their families and friends, respectively.

Problem-focused coping (P-Scale) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Subjects were asked to name the most difficult problem or situation that they had encountered in the previous month. Then, in reference to it, they responded "yes" or "no" to 24 problem-focused coping strategies, indicating whether or not they had utilized each strategy.

Adolescent Life Events Checklist (Yeaworth, York, Hussey, Ingle, & Goodwin, 1980). Subjects indicated whether they had experienced each of 31 stressful life events, chosen for relevance to an adolescent population, during the previous month. Total scores were derived using normative weightings provided by Yeaworth et al.

State-Trait Personality Inventory--State Scale (Spielberger, 1979). This consists of three subscale measures of state anxiety, anger, and curiosity. Each subscale consists of 10 declarative statements regarding subjects' present feelings using the options "Not at all," "Somewhat," "Moderately so," and "Very much so."

Procedure

Subjects completed the entire battery in small groups during study periods on two occasions, separated by a one-month interval. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Results

The data were examined in three respects: consistency

over time (i.e., test-retest reliability of each measure); relationships among the variables within each time period; and relationships among different variables across time (i.e., "cross-lagged" correlations).

THe consistency across the one-month period appeared highest for PSS-Fa and PSS-Fr ($r(88)=.80$ and .79, $p<.001$, respectively). The obtained reliability of the P-Scale coping items ($r=.69$, $p<.001$) may have been influenced (lowered) by subjects' choices of different stressful situations on the successive sessions. (Problems named in response to the P-Scale were categorized as related to family, friends, school, and "other," the first two categories accounting for slightly more than 50% of the responses). There was some consistency in reporting of stressful life events in two nonoverlapping months ($r=.32$, $p<.001$). The consistencies of the state anxiety, anger, and curiosity measures were in the moderate range: $r(88)=.57$, .60, .52, $p<.001$, respectively, as would be expected since they measure states rather than traits (see Table 2).

The correlations among all variables within Times 1 and 2 are presented in Table 1. PSS-Fa and PSS-Fr were correlated with each other at both times ($p<.001$); and were for the most part (with the exception of PSS-Fa at Time 2) related to coping (P-Scale). PSS-Fa was related negatively to State Anxiety and Anger at both times ($p<.01$) but not to Curiosity. The relationship between PSS-Fr and subjective

states was somewhat less consistent. Stressful life events was related to State Anxiety at Time 1. State Anxiety and Anger were highly correlated at both time periods ($p < .001$); but for the most part were unrelated to State Curiosity.

The relationships among the variables across time are presented in Table 2. A simultaneous examination of both tables demonstrates at least as many significant cross-lagged correlations as within-time correlations. This is true even when when relationships among variables within the same "construct area" (specifically, those between PSS-Fa and PSS-Fr, and between pairs of the three subjective state dimensions) are excluded (14 significant within-time correlations to 16 significant cross-lagged correlations). In many instances, the cross-lagged correlations appeared to be in the same range as the corresponding within-time correlations. The relationship between PSS-Fa and State Anxiety can serve as an example: $r = -.26$ (PSS-Fa at Time 1, Anxiety at Time 2) and $r = -.26$ (Anxiety at Time 1, PSS-Fa at Time 2), vis a vis r's $= -.28$ (Time 1) and $-.48$ (Time 2). This observation applies to the relationships between PSS-Fa and the subjective States of Anxiety and Anger; PSS-Fr and coping (F-Scale); and Life Events and Anxiety.

A series of partial correlations was computed in order to control for the effect of instrument reliability in accounting for significant cross-lagged correlations, and to examine the potential contribution of one variable to another

over time. The relationship between antecedent PSS-Fa and subsequent State Anxiety and State Anger remained significant when antecedent levels of the respective subjective state measures were controlled (partial r's(87) = -.25, $p < .01$; and -.22, $p < .05$, respectively). However, the reverse was not true: that is, controlling for antecedent levels of PSS-Fa, the contribution of State Anxiety and Anger to subsequent PSS-Fa was nonsignificant. Similarly, PSS-Fr appeared to contribute over time to State Anger (partial $r(87) = -.18$, $p < .05$), but not vice versa. Based upon a similar approach, State Anxiety appeared to contribute to subsequent life events (partial $r = .20$, $p < .05$), while the effect of life events on subsequent anxiety, controlling for antecedent anxiety, only approached significance (partial $r = -.14$). Partial correlations involving PSS and coping were all nonsignificant.

Discussion

This study examined the relationships of perceived social support, coping, and life events, to subjective states over a one-month period in a group of urban lower middle-class, predominantly minority adolescent girls. The nature and determinants of subjective states are poorly understood; however such information may have particular relevance to the behavior of at-risk groups, such as the present sample. The results of this study indicate that perceived social support from friends and from family, both of which are fairly

stable, are related to subjective states of anxiety and anger. In particular, perceived family support may incline (in the case of low levels) or disincline at-risk adolescent girls to experience both anxiety and anger.

While some relationships also were observed between coping and some of the other variables, there was no clear evidence of a contribution over time of antecedent coping ability. Clearly, more research is needed in order to refine conceptualization and measurement of particular aspects of coping, in the context of particular types of stressors.

Some evidence of a contribution of antecedent state anxiety to subsequent stressful events was observed. While unexpected, this finding suggests that intrapersonal variables may in fact contribute to subsequent experiences (often a "rival hypothesis" in correlational studies of stress and maladjustment). Furthermore, it indicates a need for further research in the area of the potentially contributing role of subjective states in maladaptive behavior.

The most important finding of this study is the role of perceived family support as a potential augmenter or reducer of subsequent emotional states. This suggests that the enhancement of family support may serve some preventive function for individuals who might be expected to behave in impulsive and/or maladaptive fashions, including low-income, minority adolescent girls. This finding should be replicated

in other populations. In addition, the effects of subjective states, particularly anxiety and anger, in precipitating maladaptive behavior (as suggested by the state anxiety-life events relationship observed in this study) should be examined further.

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Table 1

Pearson Correlation Coefficients, Time 1 and Time 2

	PSS-Fr	F-Scale	Life Events	State Anx.	State Ang.	State Curio.
PSS-Fa	.35***	.27**	-.09	-.28**	-.32**	.13
	.57***	.03	-.12	-.48***	-.48***	.06
PSS-Fr		.42***	.07	-.19*	-.03	.19*
		.21*	-.09	-.37***	-.31**	.12
F-Scale			.17	.09	-.02	.08
			.17	.17	.03	.25*
Life Events				.25*	.17	-.16
				.19*	.14	-.01
State Anxiety					.64***	.21*
					.80***	.10
State Anger						.14
						.11

Note: Upper figures refer to correlations at Time 1; lower to Time 2. All correlations are one-tailed.

N = 90

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$
*** $p<.001$

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients: Variables at Times 1 and 2

	Time 2						
	PSS-Fa	PSS-Fr	P-Scale	Life Events	State Anx.	State Ang.	State Cur.
Time 1							
PSS-Fa	.80***	.39***	.02	-.16	-.36***	-.36***	.02
PSS-Fr	.35***	.79***	.28**	-.03	-.22*	-.16	.09
P-Scale	.27**	.35***	.69***	.11	.02	-.10	-.05
Life Events	-.14	.06	.15	.32	.26**	.20*	-.04
State Anxiety	-.26**	-.19*	.26**	.25**	.57***	.39***	.18*
State Anger	-.25**	-.09	-.01	.28**	.48***	.60***	.08
State Curio.	.16	.22*	.07	-.04	-.15	-.06	.52*

N=90.

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001